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A QUESTION OF POETIC DICTION IN LATIN VERSE

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In the manipulation of poetic adornment every age seems to provide its peculiar devices. Some man of imagination brings forth the invention, a hundred followers seize upon the trick and wear it into vulgarity. The next epoch must find a new one or be charged with commonplaceness. The bards in Elysium, on reading Tennyson's "Flower," must have remarked to one another: "Poor man, he is having the same old experience."

The ephemeral character of the devices becomes doubly evident to anyone who will glance over the successively popular translations of some old classic like Vergil; translations that in their day seemed adequate, but to the succeeding age proved full of mannerisms.

Our own century of poetry has become peculiarly identified with brilliance of color. Poets like Swinburne use a palette that is fairly Turneresque. It may be that poetry will for all time to come profit by this peculiar lesson of our century, but it is just as likely that a partial reaction will ensue, bidding for greater simplicity. At any rate, it is evident enough that we, living in the heyday of this Romantic tendency, find extreme difficulty in reshaping the sober Latin poetry into translations that satisfy the modern taste. In attempting to do so, the question of poetic diction becomes one of prime importance.

My special problem in this paper is a very narrow part of the whole subject, and I pursue it only as it interests me in my attempt to understand the poetry of my Vergil and Horace, and in my search for an adequate, or—shall I say?—endurable, translation of them. My text is a passage taken from Taine's description of the "Classic" poetry of England (Book III, chap. 7, 1):

The substantive is always accompanied by its adjective, its knight of honor . . . the verb, as in Lucan or Statius, is displayed, flanked on either side by a noun each decorated by an epithet; we would say that it is of a uniform make, as if fabricated by a machine.

My excuse for the following remarks lies only in experiences such as many of my readers no doubt have had. Some of my instructors in English—all too rarely students of the classics—without further thought or analysis, persisted in the habit of quoting statements like this of Taine's when explaining the wearisome style of Pope and his school. The whole class of us diligently copied the instructor's words into our notebooks, memorized them, conscientiously reproduced them at examination time—and received A+! That this process is still going on I recently discovered on dropping into a classroom lecture on the "Classical Age of English Literature." Lucan and Statius, to be sure, are still the most generally accused. Vergil and Horace are nominally, I think, as yet unindicted; but for all that, some of us have a secret fear that, so far as preponderance of adjectival coloring is concerned (and this constitutes the main charge), the earlier Latin poets differ very little from the later. The adjective is certainly more often obvious and weak in the later—but that does not constitute the indictment of Taine and our teachers.

I must add to the criticisms just cited another statement which I as constantly received from the masters of the blue-pencil in the days of "themes," to the effect that color, force, vivacity must be gained through the choice of verbs and not by means of adjectives. Thus my teachers and the critics seemed to prove that my Vergil in whom I delighted was after all a crude stylist. Yet, when I forgot the proof, a query still lingered. Whence, then, came the pleasure in reading the Latin page of Vergil, and why did not his adjective-burdened verse "disgust" me as I conceded, with Wordsworth and Taine, that Pope's often did?

To say that there are differences between Vergil and Pope in their choice of effective and picturesque epithets is not an adequate answer to the question. Too often—for our ears, attuned as they are to the rich diction of Keats and Swinburne—the adjective of Vergil seems fairly tame in itself, and sometimes quite obviously suggested by the noun which it accompanies. In the *Aeneid* this fact is partly due to the exigencies of the form. The epic attempts to tell its tale in direct narrative, with but little description or subjective coloring. Furthermore, Vergil, like his contemporaries, works on a conscious theory almost as rigid as that proclaimed by the austere Wordsworth in his

famous prologue, that poetry must be simple in its images, clear and concise in its diction. That he would not go as far as Wordsworth, however, in this respect is shown—to mention only one point—by the abundance of descriptive epithets which he permits himself to use.

The essential difference for which we are looking lies in the very structure of the languages, English and Latin. To illustrate the objectionable effect pointed out by Taine, we may turn to a characteristic bit in Pope's fourth pastoral (xi. 45-52):

No grateful dews descend from ev'ning skies,
Nor morning odours from the flow'rs arise;
No rich perfumes refresh the fruitful field,
Nor fragrant herbs their native incense yield.
The balmy Zephyrs, silent since her death,
Lament the ceasing of a sweeter breath;
Th' industrious bees neglect their golden store;
Fair Daphne's dead, and sweetness is no more.

Before attending to the main point, we may note in passing that the adjectives are usually the most obvious ones: if erased, they could easily be replaced by the most prosaic of readers. They contain hardly a suggestion that does not readily arise from the connotation of the nouns. Perfumes are usually "rich," the normal field is "fruitful;" poetry knows only of "fragrant" herbs; zephyrs have been "balmy" and bees "industrious" these many centuries.

Now, defining adjectives are often necessary; with them there is little quarrel. Descriptive adjectives that convey additional force or color may well have a place, but English abominates descriptive adjectives that stand next to their noun without adding anything to its obvious meaning and suggestions. In the poem quoted, taking some thirty lines, from l. 21 to l. 51, you will find that very few adjectives belong to either the first or the second kind; they are largely of the third. If you will take the pains to compare this passage with any descriptive passage in Vergil of equal length—e. g., *Aeneid* vii. 8-38—you will find a great difference in your results. In the lines of the *Aeneid* just referred to, *candida*, *tremulo*, *inaccessos*, *adsiduo*, *nocturna*, *dira*, *lento*, *opaco*, are neither otiose nor undistinguished in their respective contexts. This is only saying that Vergil, for all his classicism, reveals an imagination that Pope does not.

But we have not yet arrived at the root of the accusation made by

Taine. It is the monotonous fall of the doublet, adjective and noun, that grows so wearisome. Seldom does Pope permit a noun to stray unchaperoned. Incessant is the march of the pairs:

No *rich perfumes* refresh the *fruitful field*,
Nor *fragrant herbs* their *native incense* yield.

Now, we do not feel the same oppressive monotony in the passage from Vergil, although a count will reveal almost the same number of adjectives. In fact, Taine's statement is half true as to facts, though wholly misleading in its implications. Pope's style is largely due to a certain kind of copying of the Latin poets, even of Vergil and Horace, not to lay all the blame upon the later poets. But the *nature* of the copying is the essential point. In translating from the Latin, the English "classicists" rendered their Latin models word for word, keeping so far as possible the original constructions—the same parts of speech—not noting that devices suitable to the mechanism of Latin might prove unendurable in English. The rigidly fixed order of the English sentence compels descriptive adjectives in most cases to stand next to their nouns. In the Latin poets they have no fixed place. In the passage (*Aeneid* vii. 8–38) referred to, only five times out of a possible thirty-three does the noun stand adjacent to the adjective. In turning that passage into English, most translators would unite the adjective and noun in all of the thirty-three instances. The result would be destructive of all enjoyment. Vergil reads like Pope at once. Not even the beauty of the epithets can save the passage. The real difference therefore lies in the structure of the two languages.

This fact entails no slight consequence. In any language it is self-evident that the adjective is the most natural and obvious tool with which to create color, vivacity, force. That, in fact, is its *raison d'être*. If the language is highly inflected, the exact position of words associated in thought need not be rigidly fixed; the inflectional endings suffice to suggest the proper affinities. The adjective may therefore shift about in the sentence and save itself from creating an effect of officiousness. It may, so far as its position is concerned, be liberally employed in its many natural functions without offense to the ear. The case is different, however, in a language that has lost its inflections. Here fixed order becomes necessary, and the adject-

tive, bound to its one position, grows disagreeably obtrusive. Some other device must be discovered to do part of its work. So we learn to inject life and virility into the verbs, steep the nouns in color, shift the adjective if possible into the position of an attribute, or, if we keep it in its natural place, give it so much meaning as to make sure that it justifies its precarious existence. How well the earlier English poets were aware of these devices becomes evident in a very brief comparison of the Elizabethans with the poets of the eighteenth century. The latter, in translating the Latin poets, did not observe this essential difference between the structure of the Latin and English languages. They preserved the idioms and turns of the originals; and, since these unassimilated idioms were the most easily recognizable earmarks of this so-called "classic" style, they came to be adopted even in original productions as ready devices by which to gain a certain superficial "classic" tone. Excrescences were taken for charms. Distorted translations became the patterns of original verse. The omission of the antecedents of relative pronouns, the employment of absolute constructions, insertion of classic myths, references to the "Indus" and the "Scythians," were of course consciously adopted as an easy means of suggesting Horace and Vergil. But the effects resulting from overburdening the line with adjectives were probably neither deliberately sought nor analyzed. The ears of Pope and his school were trained to these effects by their translations from the classics, and the taste that might have avoided them had become vitiated through constant reading of such translations. It should be evident, then, how misleading the statement of Taine actually is. The vices that he mentions could hardly have resulted from reading Lucan or Vergil in the original with a true appreciation of their poetic values, nor from imitating in idiomatic English the actual sensations produced by such reading. The machine-like uniformity is directly traceable to the imitation of distorting and misrepresentative translations.

One can illustrate from every page of Vergil the richness and variety of effect which the structure of the Latin language permits the adjective to produce with a fairly simple diction. By the privilege of simply shifting the adjective, the poet may create new melodies and harmonies, as in the liquid line:

Dulcis et alta quies placidaeque simillima morti (*Aen.* vi. 522).

Dryden, true to his pseudo-classic habit, shackles it into this:

And heavy sleep my weary limbs possessed.

Morris, truer to his medium, suppresses an adjective and avoids monotonous positions for the rest:

Deep rest and sweet, most like indeed to death's own quietness.

By bringing forward and grouping the spondaic adjectives in *Aeneid* xi. 482, Vergil decidedly heightens the effect of grief. The line reads:

Et maestas alto fundant de limine voces.

The translator is forced through the exigencies of the English order to abandon the essential purpose of these adjectives. In the translated form they serve only as a medium of description, and as that was not their chief aim in the original, the value of the line vanishes. Morris tries to compensate for the loss by resources of his own; the result is a harshly un-Vergilian as well as un-English line:

And cast their woeful voices forth from out the high-built door.

Again, Vergil may also separate his adjective and noun in order to shape with them an appropriate frame in which to set the minor impressions of the sentence. In *Ecl.* 2. 12, 13,

At mecum *raucis*, tua dum vestigia lustrò,
Sole sub ardenti resonant arbusta *cicadis*,

does not the adjective at the beginning, anticipating the last word, set an appropriate music ringing through the following impressions—the wearisome search, the burning sun—until its noun at the end brings the mind back to the tonic, as it were? There are at least suggestions in the original, due to the placing of those two words, which are lost in Dryden's version:

While in the scorching sun I trace in vain
Thy flying footsteps o'er the burning plain,
The creaking locusts with my voice conspire,
They fired with heat, and I with fierce desire.

Moreover, Vergil, as can be seen in l. 50 of the same poem,

Mollia luteola pingit vaccinia caltha,

knows well the value of the vaguer, sensuous effects of the adjectives as anticipations of the stronger ones produced by the nouns which

follow—in this case, the grouped flower-names. The line loses much if a literal translation is made into English. Bowen gives:

Brightens with marigold yellow the bending hyacinth bells.

My point is so obvious as to need no further illustration. All that I desired was to register an illustrated protest against the indiscriminate reference of every sin perpetrated by the school of Pope to the Latin poets—references made in so superficial a manner as to lead students to infer that those sins were exact copies of flaws in the poetry of Vergil and Lucan. I have not attempted to explain adequately the style of Pope's school; mention of the critical theories of his day, and particularly of the practices of French poets, would be necessary. All I have attempted is to point out the direct or indirect influences of the stultifying translations of the classics which were in vogue in the eighteenth century. Let me frankly add to this a conclusion—obvious to be sure, but one that is often forgotten in criticizing classroom translations—namely, that not only must un-English idioms—like the absolute constructions, for example—be avoided as certain to create false impressions of Vergil's poetry, but even the finer points of difference in the spirit and structure of the two languages, as well as in the scope and service of their various parts of speech, must be clearly understood. Thus it must be made clear that it is impossible to translate every descriptive adjective of Vergil by an English adjective. The spirit of our language forbids it. Some of these adjectives may be thrown into the position of attributes or into relative clauses; at times a more vigorous verb or a more highly colored noun may be found to compensate for their suppression; at times we must either boldly prune them away and endure the loss without compensation, or we must attempt to make up for it by a shift of emphasis. And all this only goes to enforce the never too much emphasized contention that, since translations are at best inadequate and misleading, students should be induced as early as possible to enjoy their Latin poets in the original.